

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

For Release to PMs Thursday, July 2, 1970

Carroll 343-5634

MERCURY FOUND TO BE ANOTHER ENVIRONMENTAL MENACE FOR BALD EAGLES

Add mercury to the list of environmental menaces for America's declining national bird--the bald eagle.

Interior Department scientists at the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Laurel, Md., have implicated mercury as a cause of death in bald eagles.

Four birds examined in a new mercury testing program at the Center contained residues of this heavy metal--two from Minnesota had lethal amounts of 130 parts per million (ppm) and 117 ppm in the kidneys. Autopsy findings and microscopic studies of the kidneys had pointed to heavy metal poisoning.

The other eagles, which had been shot in Wisconsin, had sublethal amounts in the kidneys--7.9 ppm and 7.7 ppm.

Dr. Leslie L. Glasgow, Assistant Secretary of Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, announced that in the future all bald eagles examined at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center will be tested for mercury. Most bald eagles found dead in the United States are sent there for study.

Dr. Eugene Dustman, Director of the Research Center, believes the eagles are picking up mercury through the ingestion of fish. Mercury contamination of the Great Lakes already is causing serious concern; the Bureau is investigating the effects of heavy metals on the fish and wildlife in the Great Lakes and its tributaries.

Canada estimates that 250,000 pounds of mercury are deposited in the Great Lakes by Canadian industry each year. The United States' contribution may exceed 500,000 pounds annually.

Mercury and other heavy metals are exceedingly persistent in nature, remaining perhaps 50 to 100 years in stream and lake bottoms. Means of removal are still unknown, but the Bureau is seeking answers.

Another environmental menace for eagles is dieldrin pesticide. On June 5, Sport Fisheries and Wildlife announced that poisoning from dieldrin has been detected in growing numbers of bald eagles found dead in this country.

The national bird is declining in numbers in the United States, although no accurate estimate of the bald eagle population can really be made for these far-ranging birds.

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